

The Dream Job Just Doesn't Exist: Analysing The Current Games Journalism Landscape

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past twelve months, the gaming media landscape has faced numerous layoffs and cuts, at enthusiast sites dedicated to covering games and popular culture like IGN (Liao 2023), as well as more traditional legacy outlets such as The Washington Post (Ellison and Izadi 2023). These layoffs are not isolated, fitting into a multi-year trend both within gaming and the broader media spheres which games media inhabits. Just as games journalism once transitioned away from the domain of magazines and “niche” press (Kirkpatrick 2015) (Golding 2021), it now finds itself transitioning away from the advertising-based online model which has been its default status for the past decade. Unfortunately, this new landscape has not yet had sufficient analysis. Nieborg and Foxman (2023) recently analysed the tensions in the working conditions and lack of mainstream recognition the field receives in their book “Mainstreaming and Games Journalism” but they leave open the question as to what the possible futures of gaming journalism may be an important question in the field’s current changing context. This paper, then, will build upon their analysis, as well as earlier analysis by scholars such as Kirkpatrick (2015) to highlight how these emerging tensions caused by layoffs are being negotiated by creators in the industry.

Particular focus will be given to an early analysis the precarity which workers in this field face and comparing the role of what is traditionally viewed as games journalism with the variety of forms of “gaming content creation” popularised by Twitch, YouTube and other new media platforms. This precarity has been analysed by Fisher and Mohammed-Baksh who note it fosters an anxiety in journalists which affects how they report on issues in the industry (Fisher and Mohammed-Baksh 2020). Similarly, Kuclich (2005) has noted the ways precarity has allowed exploitation of labour in game modding communities. Building on their work, this paper will not only shed light on how the broader gaming media sphere is being changed, but also how these changes reflect broader trends within new media ecosystems.

To do this, the paper draws on eleven in-depth interviews – most lasting over an hour – with current and former games journalists from Australia, the UK and the USA, gathered as part of my PhD project examining gaming podcasts and their creators. The majority of these creators now work independently from the niche or legacy outlets discussed earlier, with their work being funded primarily through crowdfunding platforms like Patreon, a point which only serves to highlight the field’s precarity. Interviews covered a wide variety of topics related to these issues, including details of their past employment, discussion of why they decided to go independent, criticisms of the field and their perspectives on its current state. These

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interviews will form the basis for the subsequent analysis, which will highlight three key themes which arose during open coding of the interviews. These themes relate to the industry's ongoing shift which was discussed by creators either explicitly or implicitly.

I will first highlight the ways in which journalists in the field are increasingly forced into positions with little to no job security, forced into freelance or casual positions on a permanent basis. This section will highlight their perspectives on the industry here, focusing on their explanations for what caused this shift and their speculation about what the future of the industry may hold. Following this I will shift to a discussion of why these creators often decided to shift towards independent work and "gaming content creation" more broadly, analysing both their motivations for this change as well as how they frame their work. Some of the creators embraced the label of games journalist while working independent, while others were more hesitant, highlighting the "gaming content creation" field as one which was distinct from their previous work. This discursive framing is particularly relevant given the blurred lines and overlap between the fields; gaming journalism is arguably in crisis while gaming content creation continues to progress from strength to strength. Building on this overlap, the third and final section will dive deeper into what distinguishes the two fields, highlighting that – while journalists may be continuing the work they did in the field independently – the resources and goal of games journalism sits in tension with the goals of the majority of gaming content creation. Subsequently, this paper will conclude with a call to action highlighting the need for further research into the current crisis moment in the field as well as the continuing need for the existence of a robust games journalism field alongside the growing gaming content creation sphere. It is my hope that highlighting these issues will spark further discussion about the current state of gaming journalism both in Australia and abroad, as well as emphasise the importance of analysing the field for game studies as a discipline.

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIO

Ryan Stanton is a PhD student at the University of Sydney. His doctoral research is the first large scale analysis of gaming podcasts and is focused on situating them within the broader gaming media ecosystem. He is particularly interested in issues of labor and precarity, analyzing how these creators make a living in the field. Prior to this, he completed his honors analyzing the fan communities of Actual Play podcast, *The Adventure Zone*, a summary of which is forthcoming in the *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*.

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